

the dark side

Can a sister's love keep her twin brother safe on Everest's treacherous slopes? By **Bron Willis**.



I'd never heard of "radio darkness" before. It's a term used by mountaineers when they switch off the radio, saving batteries and cognitive energy to focus on the task of climbing – or descending – a mountain. But when my twin brother, Patrick, was on Everest, I came to know radio darkness from the other side: the side at home, where loved ones wait, in silence and darkness.

I was at home on the endless night his crampon-covered boots found a place to tread on Everest's faltering ice and snow a thousand times. I stepped the journey of our fraught but loving relationship while his boots landed, one after the other, on the mountain's awe-inspiring surface.

Earlier, I'd heard my father's worried voice on the phone announcing Patrick's arrival at the summit. My brother, with whom I'd shared a womb and a lifetime, had summoned a power and determination that many will never seek to achieve something truly great. I had waited for the joy to come, the celebration, but mostly I found fear.

I'd heard sounds in the background of that call that rocked me. They came from deep within my mother: a guttural, howling noise from a body that couldn't bear the enormity of what it stood to lose. "He's not supposed to be up there still. He's supposed to be descending. It's too late in the day!"

As lovers of the outdoors, my family and I had read the books – *Into Thin Air*, *The White Spider*, *Touching the Void* – that told of human triumph and disaster, salvation and death, in the world's high mountain ranges. We knew too much and not enough.

We knew about the sacred turnaround time, at which mountaineers should turn for home. The ascent was half the journey; the steps down more treacherous still. Climbers died because they stayed too late, captivated perhaps by the aura, the drug, of the highest place on the planet, where the curvature of the earth can be seen and where life was not meant to exist.

My mother regained composure and reconnected with her faith that he was not a reckless, nor inexperienced climber. But the image of a mother rocking her baby's lifeless body had entered my mind and refused to leave.

I went home from work and went about my evening. I checked my phone a thousand times and a thousand more. And I went through the motions of sleep. Sleep never came.

My mind went so many places that night: to the years we had shared in our family of six; to the oval across from my parents' house where we had stood on sports day, hands on the trophy as captains of the winning house; to our first family trek in New Zealand, when a thirst for mountains was born in my brother, and for wilderness in myself.

I counselled him, gently then sternly: decide that you want to live more than you want to give in.

I thought of his bright orange suit. I thought of his gloves and whether his fingers were moving in them. And, almost obsessively, I thought of his boots on the wind-whipped ice.

The hours passed, the clock measured seconds and I stayed with him. My mind climbed up and down the mountain, searching for him, searching for our connection.

Would my love keep him safe on Everest's treacherous slopes? Or would he die on that mountain, having never understood my ferocious yet troubled love, a love I felt had baffled and frustrated him, with its needs and demands, over the years?

And did he understand what he was asking of us as he placed his precious life, our precious love, in the whimsical hands of Everest?

I willed him to think of his power. I counselled him, gently then sternly: fill your lungs with oxygen, pick up your leaden boot, move your frozen fingers, clip in to that safety line. Decide, one more time, again and again, through the night and the dawning day, that you want to live more than you want to give in.

When eventually my phone lit up as a text message arrived, my hand was on it before a sound escaped. Patrick was in his tent at Camp Four. Ahead of him still were days of descending, the Lhotse Wall, the Khumbu Icefall. But the ultimate danger, the "death zone", was behind him. He was sleeping, deliriously spent, but alive.

I will never know what those hours were like for him. For a long time I wanted to understand them, to share them. But his experience is unknowable to me – in its sublimeness and its suffering. Everest is something he can only ever truly share with those who stood on its roof alongside him, those who played a part in his safe return.

One of those men has since been lost to Everest. I felt deep sadness when I heard this. This was a man I'd never met. But I felt such gratitude – and strange, distant pain for his wife, his children, his sister. The loss was something else entirely for my brother.

The mountains still call my brother. And the place where he stood carries not his footprint, for that surface is ever-changing, but some part of him. It carries, too, a part of the families, partners and friends who love those who stood there. And it carries a part of my heart that, amid nearby hanging clouds, whispers "thank you". •